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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 005447

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SENATORS DODD AND KERRY PUSH PRESIDENT ASAD TO
CHANGE DIRECTION

Classified By: CDA William Roebuck for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary. Senators Kerry and Dodd had a wide-ranging conversation with President Asad that focused on Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Senators cautioned Asad that his relations with America would not improve without his regime changing its destabilizing policies in the region. They warned him not to assume that because the Democrats won control of Congress and the Baker-Hamilton report advised re-engaging Syria, his isolation would end without positive unilateral action on his part. Asad expressed a desire to help bring stability to Iraq, his willingness to push Hamas to compromise to stop escalating violence in Gaza and the West Bank, and his support for the Arab League initiative to resolve the crisis in Lebanon. The Senators emphasized that Asad's ability to influence the very negative international perception of his regime would rest on how events on the ground played out over the next weeks, especially in Lebanon. End summary.

¶2. (C) On December 20, Senator Christopher Dodd and Senator John Kerry, along with their respective staffs, met for nearly two and a half hours with President Bashar Asad and his Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim. The two sides discussed Iraq, the Palestinian) Israeli conflict, Lebanon, Syria's alliance with Iran, intelligence cooperation, rising extremism in Syria, embassy security, and possibilities for improving bilateral relations. Asad appeared relaxed, open, and willing to discuss any topic raised. The Senators offered Asad an opportunity to articulate what he was willing to do to change the current course of events. Both emphasized to Asad that his willingness to engage America and end his country's international isolation would be measured by events on the ground and not by public or private statements. Senator Kerry cautioned Asad not to be fooled by any temporary feelings of self-confidence his regime may be enjoying because of recent events in the region, as the current course his regime is on holds very negative future consequences for Syria.

Iraq

¶3. (C) Asad opined that Iraq was currently heading towards a full blown civil war with very troubling implications for Syria. He commented that the SARG, therefore, has four priorities for Iraq: establishing stability; supporting a national dialogue that includes the Sunnis; border security; and being part of the political process. Asad stressed that the biggest obstacle to progress on any of the above is the continued exclusion of the Sunnis from the political process.

Asad offered that Syria could play a critical role in bringing key disaffected elements (the Baathists, Sunni Islamists, and some Shia, including Moqtada Al-Sadr) to the table if the USG would allow it. In the meantime, Syria would continue to work unilaterally on its four priorities in Iraq irrespective of USG action because it was in its national interest to do so, according to Asad.

¶4. (C) Senator Kerry told Asad that strong, constructive unilateral action on Iraq could go a long way in improving international perceptions of Syrian misbehavior. Senator Dodd encouraged Asad to respond officially, (the MFA to Embassy Damascus), on ways it could implement the Syria-specific recommendations in the Baker Hamilton report. Asad asked Dodd to pass him the recommendations through FM Mu'allim, but complained that up to now, the USG had given him no credit for actions already taken, including strengthening control of Syria's border with Iraq, arresting 1600 jihadists heading to Iraq, and strengthening immigration procedures at Damascus airport to exclude Arab males, 18 to 30 years of age who had no compelling reason to visit. Asad commented that Nigel Sheinwald, foreign policy advisor to PM Tony Blair, asked him to support the political process in Iraq and secure his border - both of which Syria is now doing, according to Asad. Asad commented that Iraq was the best opportunity -- at least initially -- for bilateral cooperation and asked that the USG take his positive response to Sheinwald's requests as proof of his desire to help.

Iran

¶5. (C) Both Senators expressed deep concern over Iran's destabilizing role in Iraq and the region. Asad commented

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that he had no specific information about Iran's involvement in Iraq but opined that Ahmadinejad's rhetoric is misleading. Asad opined that Iran had as big an interest in stability in Iraq as Syria and could be enticed to play a positive role if engaged correctly. Asad admitted that his country's relationship with Iran was a cause of concern for other Arab leaders but he attributed that to their misunderstanding of the nature of the relationship. He commented that during his visit to the UAE on December 17 he was able to allay most of concerns UAE leaders had and he planned to do the same with others. Asad commented that in any case, Syria's relations with Iran are valued and enduring, as Iran was one of the only countries to stand by the SARG when Syria's international isolation was the deepest. Asad commented that even if Syria were to abandon the relationship, however, it would have no effect on Iran's regional policies or its pursuit of its nuclear program.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

¶6. (C) Asad asserted that Syria, likewise, had an enduring relationship with Hamas that would not end as long as Hamas continued to represent the majority of Palestinians. In spite of that, the SARG was pushing Khalid Misha'al and other Hamas leaders to make concessions to form a unity government and to not allow the current crisis to escalate any further, according to Asad. Asad said that he also remains in close coordination with the Qataris in their efforts to positively resolve the Hamas-Fatah conflict. Both Senators pressed Asad to make a positive public gesture towards Israel, like helping to return the four captured Israeli soldiers. (Note. Senator Dodd brought up an additional specific case of an Israeli soldier that disappeared on the Golan in 1997. End note.) Asad said that his recent public statements about peace should be taken as such a gesture and that it would be difficult for him to do more without some similar gesture from Israel, especially given internal opposition to rapprochement with Israel and his own concerns about the possibility of being perceived as weak by the Arab street.

Lebanon

¶7. (C) Both Senators laid heavy emphasis on the necessity for the Asad regime to stop destabilizing Lebanon and allowing the Hariri tribunal to be established. Both affirmed that US support for the Siniora government is extremely strong in America and transcends party politics. Asad affirmed that he supports implementation of UNSCR 1701, was not opposed to the Hariri investigation. However, with regard to the Lebanon Tribunal, the SARG objected to the way it was established and to the timing of certain decisions that led to its formation. Asad said that he was willing to be pragmatic towards the Siniora government, even though SARG relations with PM Siniora himself were poor. Asad commented, however, that the current political confrontation was being driven by Hizballah and Michel Aoun, and not the SARG. Based on his deliberations with Hizballah leader, Hasan Nasrallah, Asad doubted Hizballah would easily settle for less than one-third plus one. Asad added, however, that he fully supports the Arab League initiative to resolve the crisis as his own priority is that a compromise be found. He said he looked forward to Arab League SYG Amr Moussa's expected December 21 visit to Damascus. Asad commented that greater instability in Lebanon had troubling implications for Syria's own security. Senator Dodd ended the conversation by reaffirming the necessity of Asad's words being translated into events on the ground. Senator Kerry commented that the next weeks were critically important if Asad were to have any hope of changing outside perceptions of the negative role his regime was playing in Lebanon.

Security Cooperation

¶8. (C) Asad commented that extremism was on the rise in Syria citing as examples the killing of an Al-Qaida leader on the border with Lebanon three weeks ago, the 12 September attack on the US embassy in Damascus, and the June attack on the Damascus TV and Radio building. Nonetheless, Asad asserted he was only interested in restarting intelligence cooperation under two conditions: that a third party is involved and that it follow political re-engagement. Asad attributed the failure of previous collaboration to

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ambiguous and vaguely defined USG requests which Syria felt it was fulfilling but US officials publicly criticized the SARG for not doing enough. Therefore, Syria wanted to involve a third party in any future collaboration to help resolve discrepancies between what is requested by the U.S. and what is undertaken and implemented by Syria. Asad commented that the GOS had arranged for such a collaboration to occur in Spain last month, but the USG canceled the meeting. The same had occurred in France the previous year, according to Asad.

¶9. (C) Senator Dodd pushed Asad to respond positively to any Embassy Damascus, requests for security improvements, in light of the September 12 attack on the Embassy.

¶10. (U) Senator Dodd and Senator Kerry cleared this cable.
ROEBUCK